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ABSTRACT

Elementary school teachers are introduced to role playing as a device for encouraging students to understand and empathize with other people's attitudes, values, and feelings. Two approaches to classroom role playing are discussed. The first, set forth by Schaftel, includes the following steps: warming up, selecting role players, setting the stage, preparing the audience to be participating observers, enactment, discussion and evaluation, revised re-enactment, sharing experience, and generalizing. A shorter approach, suggested by Schuncke, involves a warm-up period during which the problem situation is introduced and discussed, the action period, and debriefing. Seven variations of role playing are outlined, including free play, pantomime, improvisation, puppetry, dramatization, sociodrama, and simulation games. Also listed are eight recommendations for successful role playing, and specific suggestions for role playing with hesitant students and with students comfortable with the activity. This paper concludes with a list of resources for incorporating role playing into the social studies curriculum. (LP)

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VITALIZING YOUR SOCIAL STUDIES CLASS WITH ROLE-PLAYING

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VITALIZING YOUR SOCIAL STUDIES CLASS WITH ROLE-PLAYING

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One of the most important tasks of Social Studies teachers is to help children get into the "shoes" of other people. Role-playing is one of the best devices to provide children with experiences that enable them to empathize and understand other peoples attitudes, feelings, values and emotions.

The most vivid, detailed and directive presentation of role-playing in elementary school situations has been developed by Fannie and George Shafstel.¹ They refer to role-playing as a kind of "reality practice," that enables individuals or groups to relive critical incidents, to explore what happened in them and to consider what might have happened if different choices had been made in the effort to resolve the problems involved.

Children have the natural ability to "feel" which is extremely helpful in our efforts to teach them how to "understand."

Empathy, an outgrowth of feelings, provides children with a vehicle that helps them to understand another person's point of view. Role-playing is a conscientious attempt on the part of the teacher to use these natural tendencies of empathy for developing healthy relationships. It encourages a child to step outside the accustomed role that he plays in life, relinquishing his usual patterns of behavior in exchange for the role and patterns of another person.

The following steps are used by Shafstel in their presentation of role-playing.²

1. "Warming up" the group (problem confrontation). Acquaints the group with the problem at hand, expressed often in a problem story which stops at the dilemma point. What do you think will happen now?
2. Selecting participants (role players). Teacher may ask the group to describe the various characters. Important to use individuals who have identified with the role, or who have strong feelings about the behavior of specific characters.
3. Setting the stage. Each child is reminded of the role he is to take. A simple line of action is selected for exploration.
4. Preparing the audience to be participating observers. "Listening" is discussed with the observers. Think about alternative solutions to the problem which you will have an opportunity to try out after the first idea has been explored.
5. Role playing (the enactment). Each player must think and feel on his feet, spontaneously reacting to the developing situation. No role player is evaluated for his acting. The test: is the portrayal true to life?

1. Shafstel, Fannie R. and Shafstel, George. Role-Playing for Social Values. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), Chapter 5.

2. Ibid. p. 203

6. Discussion and evaluation. Discussion is usually vigorous. Alternative ideas are given. The teacher's questions look ahead to the consequences of the behavior which has been enacted.
7. The re-enactment (further role-playing). Replaying revised roles, playing suggested next steps or exploring alternative possibilities. Moving back and forth from acting to discussing to acting again can be a most effective learning sequence.
8. Sharing experience and generalizing. A period of general discussion-exploration of the consequences of behavior. Some role-playing sessions do not reach the level of generalization, and go no further than numerous attempts to solve the problem-story situation itself.

A more streamlined approach to role-playing is suggested by George Schuncke as follows:³

1. Warm-up
2. action period
3. debriefing

Warm-up

i.e. the teacher gives an open-ended problem, asks for possible solutions, determines students for roles, gives other students observation tasks.

Action Period

Students "act through" the given situation.

Debriefing

A time for sharing, reflecting and evaluating what occurred during the action period.

There are many other ideas of what role-playing should consist of. Most proponents include the basic steps aforementioned with some simple variations of these steps.

Maxim points out that role-playing may take several forms.⁴

1. Free play - children act out roles that are most familiar to them (mom and dad). Then move on to acting out additional roles as their experiences increase (firefighter, doctor etc.).
2. Pantomime - a creative art where children using bodily expressions to convey ideas without words.
3. Improvised Skits - children are given a situation and are encouraged to use their imagination to come up with dialogue and acting.

3. Schuncke, George M. "Action Approaches to Learning." p. 212 Social Studies, September/October, 1978.

4. Maxim, George W. Social Studies and the Elementary School Child. Toronto: Charles E. Merrill Company, 1983.

4. Puppetry - children usually have a great interest in puppets. They are helpful with shy children.
5. Dramatization - a formal play including script, costumes and scenery before an audience.
6. Sociodrama - unrehearsed acting out of a special problem resulting from a social relations dilemma. Sociodrama can help put children in the position of others.
7. Simulation Games - these games require participants to sometimes assume realistic roles in a simplified representation of reality.

The use of role-playing in a social studies curriculum provides many benefits.

1. children generally enjoy role-play
2. high interest activity
3. it enhances creativity
4. helps non-verbal students
5. strengthens child's self-concept
6. provides an opportunity to build the child's sensitivity to the feelings of others (empathy)
7. it's a valuable opportunity for group participation cooperation
8. encourages learning by doing
9. develops social skills
10. improves interpersonal relations
11. focuses on feelings and attitudes
12. it provides an excellent opportunity for the teacher to evaluate the extent to which concepts have been developed. Teachers can evaluate role-playing activities by keeping anecdotal records of behavior change, class discussions and observation, objective and subjective evaluation techniques, quizzes, post debriefing completion of reaction forms.

Some suggestions for successful role-playing sessions are:

1. budget the time
2. give assistance carefully
3. encourage and praise all creative efforts
4. provide props to help "anxious" children
5. be alert to role-play as a stepping stone
6. don't find fault with any dramatization
7. patience - don't expect instant results and miracles
8. be careful when selecting or matching students with roles

The following are some role-play ideas that John Ahearns and Nanci Lucas suggest for classroom use.⁵

5. Ahearns, J. and Nanci Lucas. Ideas. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

Initiatory role-playing suggestions for children who might be hesitant to role play:

1. Have the entire group pantomime a simple act, for example, eating an ice cream cone.
2. Have a few individuals stand up and pantomime an independent act, such as playing with a yo-yo.
3. Ask two individuals to stand up and pantomime a cooperative act, for example, tossing a basketball back and forth.
4. Assign one individual a simple problem that can be done in a monologue, such as pretending to talk to a friend about what has just happened in class. (Note that the individual is given no preparation--his act is an impromptu as well as a solo performance.)
5. Give an individual a complex problem that can be enacted in a monologue, for example, pretend to telephone someone to persuade him to help you with your homework.
6. Require two individuals to interact regarding a given problem--have them discuss how they are going to persuade the teacher not to give the math test tomorrow.

NOTE: For each step, choose children who will be comfortable in front of the class. Accept volunteers. Bring in simple props--hats, coats, etc. Encourage students to applaud. Point to insightful actions or statements made by role-players.

For children who are more comfortable with role-playing:

1. The teacher conducts a monologue and answers questions: "My name is Miss O'Hara. I live on a plantation. I've led an interesting life. After I've shared it with you, I would be happy to answer questions about my experiences."
2. The teacher conducts a dialogue with a child: "Yesterday, I told you about my childhood on the plantation. Today I am visiting my northern cousin. Her life is different. We're going to talk about our different lives."
3. The teacher and child (children) assume roles and debate an issue (if appropriate, conduct as part of step 2): "My cousin and her brothers oppose slavery, but I don't. We'll let you listen to our discussion."
4. The children assume roles and debate an issue: "Some people thought that the government should buy all the slaves, and thus do away with slavery. Others thought that the slaveowners should not be paid for slaves. Do you understand both views? Let's ask for volunteers to role-play a discussion between the two people."

Ahearns and Lucas offer some other ways to use role playing:

1. After a child has read a story, ask him to pretend to be the hero, who has been invited to the class to tell about his life.
2. Ask a child or children to role-play a historical event they have studied.
3. Use children's current events newspapers (e.g., Weekly Reader, News Ranger) that present opportunities to do simple role-playing. (e.g., assume the identity of someone described in the paper.)

4. Read a "problem story" to children and have children assume roles in the story. Ask them to discuss how the story character might feel.

Try some role-playing activities. Your teaching and the use of role-playing will help to vitalize your social studies classes. Both you and your students will be stimulated and your social studies curriculum will be greatly enhanced. It's fun to do!

The following are some resources that will help to develop role-playing as a meaningful part of your social studies curriculum:

Berber, E.E. "Social Skills Training With Children," Behavior Analysis, Spring, 1982.

Blair, S. and B. Wheeler. "In the Shadow of Three Mile Island," Instructor, Summer, 1979.

Chesler, Mark and Robert Fox. Role-Playing Methods in the Classroom. Chicago: Science Research Association, 1966.

Furness, Pauline. Role Playing in the Elementary School. New York: Hart Publishing Co., Inc., 1976.

Gartner, Alan. Children Teach Children. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.

Hawley, Robert C. Value Exploration Through Role-Playing. New York: Hart Publishing Co., Ind., 1975.

Leyser, Y. "Role Play in the Classroom: A Threat or Promise," Contemporary Education, Winter 1982.

McClure, L. F., "Enhancing Social Problem Solving Performance in an Elementary Setting," Educational Psychology, August, 1978.

Schunke, G. M., "Action Approaches to Learning," Social Studies, September/October, 1978.

Thompson, L. F., "Using Role-Playing in the Classroom," Phi Delta Kappa Fastbacks, 114: 7-37.